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Casey Is Reported to Have Tried To Block Articles Based on Secrets

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WASHINGTON, May 6 — The Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, attempted in recent days to prevent publication of information from classified intelligence documents, Federal sources said today.

One source said that Mr. Casey had threatened to prosecute The Washington Post and other newspapers and magazines regarding secret Government material.

A Federal law-enforcement official said that he believed some of the classified documents obtained by The Post involved Ronald W. Pelton, a former communications specialist at the National Security Agency, who is awaiting trial on an espionage charge.

The official said that he had no detailed knowledge of Mr. Casey's purported threats to The Post and said he believed the Justice Department would not prosecute any publication regarding the material.

It could not be learned if publications other than The Post had access to documents about Mr. Pelton, who is accused of selling secret information to the Soviet Union about covert intelligence projects.

'Cooler Heads Will Prevail'

The law-enforcement official said that prosecution was unlikely, despite what the official described as Mr. Casey's desire to charge some publications with violations of Federal law involving classified documents.

"Cooler heads will prevail," the official said, noting that the Justice Department failed in the past to obtain court approval to stop newspapers from publishing articles.

Prosecution would be considered, however, should Mr. Casey make a formal request, another official said. He said that The Post was preparing an article involving the classified documents and would publish it shortly.

According to the official, Mr. Casey met in recent days with Justice Department officials, including Deputy Attorney General D. Lowell Jensen, to discuss possible prosecution. After that meeting, the official said, Mr. Casey met with Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of The Post, and Leonard Downie Jr., the paper's managing editor. Mr. Bradlee declined to comment on the case.

Mr. Pelton was arrested last November and charged with espionage and conspiracy to commit espionage, both of which are punishable by a maximum penalty of life in prison. According to testimony by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mr. Pelton provided information to Soviet officials, first at the Soviet Embassy in Washington and later at a meeting in Vienna.

Mr. Pelton worked at the National Security Agency for 14 years and wrote a paper in 1978 about the agency's information collection projects aimed at the Soviet Union. David Faulkner, an F.B.I. agent, has testified that Mr. Pelton first met with Soviet agents in January 1980 where he "provided specific information relating to a United States intelligence collection project targeted at the Soviet Union."

According to Mr. Faulkner, Mr. Pelton had access to "extremely sensitive information relating to that project." The bureau's statements on the case have been vague and have not provided any detail about the nature of the agency's collection projects.

After his first meeting with the Soviet agents in the embassy, Mr. Pelton was invited to Vienna where he met with Anatoly Slavnov, who was described as an intelligence officer with the K.G.B., according to Mr. Faulkner's testimony. Mr. Pelton twice traveled to Vienna and stayed for three to four days at the home of the Soviet Ambassador, Mr. Faulkner said.

According to the F.B.I. testimony, Mr. Pelton gave written answers to written questions and was questioned about "practically every area of sensitive information to which he had access through his employment at N.S.A." These included all of the programs mentioned in his 1978 report.

According to testimony at pretrial hearings, Mr. Pelton is said to have an extraordinary memory for technical details. He joined the N.S.A. in 1965 after several years in the Air Force. After training, he was stationed at the agency's collection facilities in England before returning to its headquarters in suburban Maryland.

He has admitted on the witness stand that he became a recreational drug user in recent years. He declared bankruptcy in 1980, shortly after he left the agency.